

Effects of Parental Deployment on Children during Wartime:  
A Comparison of World War Two and the Iraq/Afghanistan War

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Introduction

December 7, 1941 and September 11, 2001 both marked the beginnings of a period of historical events that affected the lives of many children in the United States. The two days marked the times in modern history where there have been foreign attacks on American soil.

What were the effects of these periods of war on the lives of American children whose parents would be deployed? While there is a considerable body of research on how war affect those directly involved, with many findings that have led to better understanding of such consequences as what we now describe as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other traumatic disorders, most of the studies have not addressed the effects war has on the children left behind.

War causes many service members to deploy to very center of combat, but what is commonly forgotten is that these servicemen and women are also often spouses, parents, siblings and friends. Their absences during deployment affect the daily lives of those left on the homefront. This paper examines some aspects of how parental deployments from both World War Two and the current Iraq/Afghanistan war affected the lives of a selected number of children who experienced separation from a parent on active service.

Among many observations about war, it has often been noted that for those affected by it adhering to strict routines and schedules often can make this time of difficulty pass by with less pain. Therefore, it is interesting to observe similarities and differences between routines and responsibilities of children in the U.S. during the WWII era and those of the “war children” of the Iraq/Afghanistan wars. Changes in the lengths of time of deployments and in

communications technology over the more than 60 years that separate these wars may have worked to improve the lives of the children left behind in the latter period. The age of the children during each period also may account for some differences in the responsibilities and routines in which children engage. This study takes account of two specific time periods: one, when the parent was away, and the second, when the parent returned home. It also describes and analyzes the behaviors of children during these two periods to suggest factors that affected the routines and responsibilities of children during wartime. In general, routines are important to family life. It is a truism that in order to prepare for a successful day, some routines are necessary. This can include doing certain things the evening before to prepare for the next day; and doing specific things in the morning may promote a more smoothly running day ahead (Gilbreth, 1928, pg 69). Routines are associated with the patterns of everyday life, but also may be even more important during times of stress. This study speaks to the similarities and different responsibilities and routines that enabled children to get through challenging times.

#### Routines during Deployment in World War Two

During WWII, people across the United States rallied to the war effort. This strong sense of purpose was helpful to many children whose fathers (very seldom were women with minor children in the Armed Forces) were away because they were able to find support all around them. In particular for older children, schools and other child-centered organizations emphasized patriotism and democratic ideals (Tuttle, 1993, pg 118). Educators, with other adults, often felt that it was important to instill these ideals into the future citizens of America. Many school systems even began to create routines that revolved around the war. One student recalls that instead of reading groups being divided into their original categories of redbirds, bluebirds, and blackbirds, they were divided into privates, corporals and sergeants—denoting military ranks

(Tuttle, 1993, pg. 120). Many children during this time thus were felt to be very connected to the war effort. Not only girls but also boys were given knitting instructions and would knit six-inch squares to be given to the Red Cross (Tuttle, 1993, pg 124). Such was the importance attached to efforts to give children a sense of responsibility and potential feeling of satisfaction. All were also encouraged to buy savings stamps and so war/savings bonds. Purchasing of these stamps became a weekly routine for many children, such that many children who forget their “stamp money” were very embarrassed (Tuttle, 1993, pg. 125) because participating in routines such as purchasing stamps was one of the best ways to contribute to the war effort. Rationing of food and many other goods also was an important aspect to the everyday life of children. Girls recalled the instinct to stand in a shop line whenever they saw one, even if they did not know what they were waiting for. It was important to stand in line because butter, sugar and other household items were in short supply, as these goods “went to war.”

Each school day began with the “Pledge of Allegiance,” and children also participated in patriotic plays and sang patriotic songs. Indeed, patriotism was a theme of the time. Routines that supported patriotism were popular among the children, and enabled them to continue with their daily lives and encouraged them to hope for a brighter future.

These changes were all apparent in the lives of all children during this time, but what about those who had their father leave the homefront to go to war? Oftentimes the older children had to take on some of the responsibilities of the father (Tuttle, 1993, pg 134). Some children noted that it completely altered the family structure. One daughter recalls that she had to become her mother’s “daughter, her best friend, and in a sense, her mother” (Tuttle, 1993, pg. 135) because she had to console her mother during times of weakness. Other children recall being proud of their mothers. They were seen as heroic and courageous during such a hard time. To

replace the absent father, children often were in the presence of a grandfather or uncle. Writing letters kept communication to the family member overseas. Although mail sometimes took a long time in transit, it was still a way for children to have contact with their absent parent. Letters from the deployed often told war stories and gave advice for the family. Some letters gave advice for children to take on some responsibilities and help and obey mother while daddy was away. When letters came, families often gathered in the living room and read them together. The greatest pain for families, of course, was the loss of a loved one. This often led to even further devastation on the homefront.

Gender and age of children affected routines, as well. Older girls were usually responsible for taking care around the house and helping with younger siblings. Older boys often prepared to enlist in the military to help with the war effort. At least one sixteen-year-old boy even falsified his age to enlist early (Tuttle, 1993, pg. 147). Tending to victory gardens also became a standard routine for children, as families or classmates would work together. The garden promoted healthy competition among school-aged children, such as who could grow the largest tomatoes. It was also a fun and patriotic way to prepare food for families. Overall, routines for children during WWII often revolved around the patriotism that was apparent across the country. It was evident that most children felt a sense of pride by being able to participate in the war effort.

#### Routines during Deployment of the Iraq/Afghanistan War

The Iraq/Afghanistan War of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century also changed the lives of children on the homefront. They were often confronted with the same challenges and hardships that WWII presented. As in WWII, many military families followed strict routines in order to help children combat the struggles that came with the absence of a father (or, now, perhaps a mother).

According to a weblog “Helping Children Deal with Deployment,” [enter blog address] parents recommended that “keeping strict routines” (Okinawa hai!, Staci, 2/15/09) was helpful for children dealing with deployments. This weblog was created by a mother concerned for her children’s wellbeing at the onset of her husband’s deployment. She asked for advice from other mothers on how to best deal with the situation. Many responses came in, and it was evident that routines were helpful for children, just as in WWII. Some of the routines involved talking about something dad was doing everyday. Others included figuring out where daddy was on a globe, or writing letters. A countdown calendar became a prominent theme to children who had deployed parents. Mothers recalled that they would have a large calendar and let the children cross off one day each night that would symbolize daddy being closer to coming home. Mothers recommended keeping mealtimes, bath times, and bedtimes the same (Okinawa hai!, Renee, 2/15/09). This consistency allows for the children to have some regularity in their lives during a time stress.

Routines often varied by ages. Although the countdown calendar was used by children of almost all ages, some other responsibilities were more evident in older children. Similar to the experience of children during WWII, older children often became responsible for their younger siblings and some household chores. Sometimes adolescents were led to forego their own personal activities in order to keep the house under control. Some adolescents came to see themselves as second parents in the household. Taking on more responsibilities could be a positive experience if adolescents learned to be more responsible, but negative if they struggled and became overwhelmed with the tasks (Huebner & Mancini, 2005). For example, one of the mothers noted that her older daughter, at the age of five, took on more responsibilities. She remembers, “My daughter was very mature for her age. She helped me a ton. She did things that most five-year olds shouldn’t have to do. She just did a ton of stuff. When we would go on a trip

she would help unload the car” (interview, Culbertson). Similarly, another mother noted that her oldest son “stepped up to be the man of the house” even though he was never asked or required to do such (interview, Woodbury). It seems that regardless of age, the older children were more initiating in taking on some responsibilities and helping out when it was needed. However, such special responsibilities often were not as structured as the everyday routines that children typically pursued.

Other age differences included how the children responded to the stress of the situation. Younger children, typically those up to age five, had a tendency to become clingier and show some signs of regressing to patterns more typically of younger children. Children in school might act out, and academic performance in school might decline. Tweens and teens might face some of the most difficult challenges as they already were dealing with the stresses of adolescence (Quigley, S).

One mother of children who had seen their father deployed recalled that keeping routines became an important part of their lifestyle. After the first night she came to accept that her husband was not coming home: “I cannot do this for a whole year and my girls can’t do this... I thought the busier I keep us the time will go by faster” (interview, Culbertson). She enrolled her daughters, who were ages five and two, in numerous activities, including swim lessons, dance, gymnastics, and reading at the library. Whereas younger children seemed to take on many outside activities, it appears that many adolescents had to sacrifice many of their extracurricular activities to help out with their younger siblings and household chores (Huebner & Mancini, 2005).

Wives whose husbands were deployed for extended tours (fifteen months) recalled that they would plan monthly events to put on the countdown calendar. This would give them short-

term goals to reach, and would help make the time pass. Some of the activities would include a plan to visit out-of-state family members, a trip to the zoo, or other various activities. One of the mothers said that the first event she planned for her three sons was to visit Thomas the Tank Engine, who was doing a showing two months after her husband's deployment. "It gave them something to look forward to because its to hard for them to comprehend 15 months down the road, just because they think in such short term, it gave them something to look forward to" (interview, Woodbury). Structure and organized activities were necessary to keep the children busy during the deployment. After the deployment, one mother recalls her daughters still being very busy but in activities that were aimed at behaviors that that liked—such as softball, and gymnastics—rather than activities just to keep them busy (interview, Culbertson). As mentioned above, the mother also observed that her five-year-old took on more responsibilities than a five-year-old normally should. She said that this child would help clean the house, take out the trash, unload the car, and other things that the mother needed help with. Keeping the children as busy as possible was necessary to help them keep their mind off of their father's absence. Another mother said that the extra money earned from deployment was used to take mini-vacations on the weekends. "When he first left, for example, I had looked online and [found that] there was a day out with Thomas the Tank Engine, in May. It was two months after he left. I told the kids, 'This is what we are going to do in two months,' so it was something for them to look forward to." These types of mini vacations were not necessarily part of a common routine when her husband was home (interview, Woodbury).

Daily routines were also necessary to maintain structure in the household. One mother stressed the importance of keeping to a strict routine because their lives otherwise were so out of control. She said that it was important to have mealtimes and bedtimes at the same time



everyday, and these daily routines did not change when their father returned home. “Routine is absolutely key because their life is so out of control. It so important that their meals are at the same time everyday and their bedtime routines don’t change from when he is home. Everything else in their life is so out of control that you just have to make their home life the consistency,” (interview, Woodbury). Being able to count on taking a bath at a certain time or having a meal at a certain time made things just a little easier on the children in their home life. Keeping a consistent home life when everything was in disarray became important to the parents and children on the homefront.

### World War Two Routines at the end of Deployment

It is quite obvious that while a parent was deployed, the homefront became a place for routines and structure. But how did normal life restore itself at the return of the deployed parent? August 14, 1945 could not have been a better day for America. The end of WWII left everyone with feelings of excitement and fulfillment. It could only mean that the homecoming of all the servicemen would ensue. During WWII, many children anticipated the return of the parent to be a fairy tale ending. Although the immediate return did seem miraculous to many children, there were more struggles than may have been anticipated. What seemed to be a wonderful occasion turned out to be more difficult than expected. Transition and adjustment were hard to prepare for and accept for the whole family. There were apparent gender differences in response to the end of WWII. Many boys played aggressively, smacking, banging pots and pans, and cheering, while girls dreamed of being kissed by the men in uniform. Some children remember happy experiences at the return of their father, such as being able “to parade him around” (Tuttle, 1993, pg 214). Others remembered only the negative effects of father’s returning home. PTSD was a common among those who returned home from combat. Many children feared that their fathers

would not know or even accept them. So much time had passed from the time of fathers leaving to their return that many children had matured and no longer wanted to be treated as the young child that father had left behind. Many fathers –along with much of the American culture postwar – struggled with alcoholism. This made it quite hard for children to re-bond with their fathers who had been away.

Some children expressed fears that their fathers would leave again. They were unable to understand the end of the war. They could only remember the abandonment they felt when their father had left. This led to challenges of being able to trust in the father's presences. Many children did not want to get too attached, and even felt that their father was a stranger. This was most common in children who were very young when their father left, but occasionally occurred when children felt they were not being treated in ways appropriate to their age. Many children also recalled being resentful to the homecoming of their father, because they felt his homecoming disrupted their lives. It was difficult for children to learn to obey and bond with their father. He was so much different than the person of the idolized photograph kept on the mantle for the past years of war. Many children had trouble obeying the authority of the returned parent. It was also found that the parent generally struggled with their children not following strict orders. In the military –especially during war—servicemen were expected to do what they were told. This may have led to the difficulties surrounding routines such as dinner, where a child may not have eaten all her food (Tuttle, 1993, pg. 223).

Children who were born toward the end of the war, or after their fathers' return were able to establish more secure relationships with their father than those who were home during their fathers' deployment (Tuttle, 1993, pg. 223). Boys who were separated from their father during deployment often times did not enjoy more masculine things, such as sports. Some theories

suggest that the absence of a father in the household led to homosexuality. Because of this the returned father often was a heavy disciplinary when it came to gender. He would reinforce this by discouraging feminine qualities in himself and in his sons (Tuttle, 1993, pg. 229).

V-J Day was a bittersweet end to what was a terrible war. However, people returning from the Iraq/Afghanistan war do not come home with a battle won. They may be forced to question whether their services will be needed again. And children, overwhelmed and exited, learn to accept their presence once again, as in the past. Obviously the end of WWII meant that an overarching war effort was no longer necessary. But the damages of the aftereffects of war still made it necessary to grow vegetables and rationing for some years later. Most rationing ended by within one year after the war. Overall, the biggest challenges the children faced at the return of their fathers –in either war-- were that they did not feel there was a place at home for him. They often felt that the man who returned home was a stranger and a relationship became hard.

#### Iraq/Afghanistan Routines at the end of Deployment

The immediate return of the deployed parent was often bittersweet. One mother remembers having her husband surprise their children, “My little boy thought his was in trouble, because we were in the office waiting for him and the office called his class room for him to come down. When he came in the office he walked past his dad, which was so funny, because when he turned around he noticed his daddy and all he could do is grab him and cry; everyone in the office was in tears. That was the best feeling in the world.” (questionnaire, Streeper). However, as in WWII the honeymoon phase ends, and the return of the deployed parent from the Iraq/Afghanistan war could pose many challenges for the children. Many mothers stated that their children’s routines were not changed significantly by the return of their parent. They also

stated that it did not appear to be difficult for older children to give up responsibilities that they had taken on during the 12-15 month deployment. One mother reported that her oldest child was very excited when her father returned home; however, her middle child, who was age 18 months, was “a bit scared of her dad” (questionnaire, Vangorder). Another mother recalled that at her husband’s return, her son still relied on her for everything. “The first two deployments, when Jason returned, Tristan would always come to me for help on something, or when he got hurt, he’d come to me. It took a while before Tristan would go to his Dad for those things, but eventually he did” (questionnaire, Barrett). This is similar to the experience of children during WWII that felt that their fathers were strangers to them. If the father left at a very young age in a child’s life, the child often had more difficulties accepting the return. Many reported that routines did not change drastically except that children did give up their responsibilities. Most of the mothers noted that the only real difference was that there became a shared responsibility in the house, but general routines with the children stayed the same (questionnaire, Van Groeder, Barrett). This could have been because even though the father was able to return from deployment, there was no guarantee that he would not be deployed again. This fear may have made it necessary to keep the routines consistent so that families could be prepared if a second deployment occurred. Unlike WWII, the return of the deployed parent did not mean that “the war was over.” Families were still faced with fears of whether they would have another period of deployment. One mother, who has dealt with several deployments, is looking forward to three years without them. She says, “We are in the process of moving. We are moving because we are guaranteed three years of no deployments! The boys and my husband need this time to bond and settle back into a “normal” routine once again. I am still terrified that after the three years at Rucker [identify?] we will be moved to a location where he will deploy once again, but I cannot

worry that far in advance right at this moment!” (questionnaire, Menold). She looks forward to the bonding that her family can finally have, and being able to settle into normal routines.

Unfortunately, like many other families, this family had to deal with several deployments before they were given quality time with the deployed parent. This can make reintegration even more difficult.

One of the difficulties that children dealt with at the reintegration of the family was that the deployed family member often came home “a different person.” Children anticipated that bonding and relationships would form immediately. But unfortunately this was not a likely scenario. One article suggests that children need to nurture their parents to help reestablish the family life (O’Donnell-Arnes, 2008). This contributes to the responsibilities that children have because they are now asked to take care of the parents. However, they still may be redeemed from other household chores and responsibilities with the presence of two parents. Servicemembers may not be as attentive to their children at their immediate return. This may be difficult for children to understand and cope with. Overall, the return of the parent was not as easy as children may have hoped or anticipated. Some recommendations were to start to routines and hobbies to do with the deployed parent; this would establish a new bond for the child and parent to share (O’Donnell-Arnes, 2008).

The fear of leaving again was also a difficult issue for children to deal with once their parent returned. As an example: In his new assignment, a father had to go on a weekend trip and the mother had to reassure her children that he was not going back to Iraq and he would be home once the weekend was over (interview, Woodbury). This was also emphasized in a study conducted by the University of California, which found that even after the deployed parents were

home for a year, children still had extremely high levels of anxiety and a fear that their parents would return to war (Zoroya, G).

### Differences between Wars

Although the common theme of routines and responsibilities was prevalent in both wars, there were still many differences. During WWII, the whole country rallied for the war effort. Regardless of whether someone had family deployed or not, they had to change their routines around rationing and victory gardens. All the people also participated in the patriotism that was in the US. Children felt support from their peers at school and at home. The community in which people lived during this time was about helping the war and making sure everyone survived during such a hard time. Unfortunately, for those who are in the Iraq/Afghanistan war, there is not such a communal effort or an overarching sense of patriotism that has spread across the nation. It could almost be considered reversed because of people who protest the war daily. Also, children who do not have parents actively involved in the war tend to forget that it is going on. The Iraq/Afghanistan war has a less significant impact on the daily lives of those who are not directly involved. This is evident in the schools, which were not always supportive of children who may have been going through rough times. One mother recalls that when her middle child was struggling in school, the teacher did not offer any empathy, but instead showed a lack of understanding toward the child (interview, Woodbury). The mother also recalled that she felt that people treated army families as people who had chosen that lifestyle and needed to “suck it up,” that is, deal with it without complaining. This mentality differs drastically from the WWII era, when there was an overabundance of support.

When comparing differences between WWII and the Iraq war, advancements in technology cannot go unstated. Children now are able to receive phone calls or even video chat

with their deployed parent. One mother recalls, “We got to see him daily on the webcams, and free phone calls that were ten minutes long, and we could instant message each other. And the mail, he needed something and I went and got it and he had a box five days later,” (interview, Woodbury). This increase in communication was helpful when the parent returned home. It made reintegration into family life easier. During WWII, the only way to communicate with people overseas was through letters. However, sending and receiving mail from overseas was a lengthy process and servicemen were not always in places that they could write or receive letters. Also, much of the time, letters written home were solely addressed to the parent, and little communication was with the child. Now, the father is able to play a role in his children’s lives, even from a distance. One mother said that she would send her deployed husband boxes of blank cards so that he could send his children cards every once in a while (interview, Woodbury). One wife recalled sending her husband coloring books so that he could color pictures and send them home to his children (Okinawa hai!, Renee, 2/15/09). Sending mail was still common during the Iraq/Afghanistan war, but addressing specific items to the children established a relationship, even from a distance. Also, phone calls and web cameras are helpful in keeping contact with the deployed parent. During WWII this was not an option for a means of contact, but the increase in technological development has made this possible. This communication becomes important at the reintegration into the family. If the children are able to keep a relationship with the deployed parent, even at a distance, it can make the return somewhat easier. Ways to help children remember and stay in contact with the deployed parent are helpful, even necessary, for support of the family.

One other thing that had a significant impact on the lives of children on the homefront was the length of the deployment. During WWII, fathers could have been gone for up to three or

four years. This had large effects on the relationships between father and children because the children had grown so much since the last time they were together. Now, the longest deployment time is fifteen months, which although still long, does not compare to the length of time the WWII fathers were gone. Service members of the Iraq/Afghanistan war were also able to come home for a period of time during deployment, generally anywhere from ten days to five weeks. Parents recalled that routines changed when a family member came home for a short period. Usually this time was treated like a vacation, and the only routines that remained consistent were mornings, evenings, and school (interview, Culbertson). Some routines were necessary to keep in place because the visit was only short and children needed to be able to handle the parent leaving again. However, fathers returning from WWII knew that they would not have to go back to war, where service members returning from the Iraq/Afghanistan war may encounter future deployments. One mother stressed that it was the multiple deployments that were the most damaging to a family (questionnaire, Menold). This is something that the WWII servicemen did not have to deal with. Overall, the two wars had varying differences, which made the challenges that children on the homefront faced different, but throughout it all, keeping to routines, and maintaining responsibilities helped in passing the time.

#### What can be learned?

It was interesting to find that routines had such an impact on the lives of children. Consistency during a time of such fear and anxiety can help create a balance for everyone. These routines were most likely helpful to adults, as well. It is evident that the similarities and differences among war children have helped advance an understanding of dealing with deployment. Something can be learned from these experiences. Keeping routines can make a period of deployment easier on children. Also, keeping a relationship with the parent that is



absence will make the return much easier. Sending/receiving letters is a way to establish a relationship, and continually incorporating the parent in every day life –figuring out what dad might be doing in Iraq when the children are eating breakfast.

Also, when planning activities and events for children to engage in, it is important to consider their age. For example, it may be easier to enroll younger children in many activities, while adolescents may have to drop some of their activities to take on new responsibilities around the house. It is important not to overwhelm children by enrolling them in more activities than they can handle, or expecting too much from them around the house, and caring for younger siblings. Although the prolonged absence of a parent due to deployment may never come easy, there have been more and more ways that people are learning to deal with the situation. Overtime, better strategies are being used to help families deal with the deployment. As WWII gave rise to ideas as to how to help future generations deal with deployment, we can only hope the Iraq/Afghanistan war will do the same.

Research sponsored by the Department of Defense has also been conducted to help children better cope with these long deployments. Similar to research found in this study, the Pentagon survey reported that half of the children studied coped well, but one-fourth of the children coped poorly, and one-third showed struggles in school (Zoroya, G). The survey also indicated that children had more fear and anxiety due to their parent's deployment, but the further studies are being done to solve these issues. Programs to help parents and children manage the stress of deployments are being implemented. These include Military Family Life Consultant Program, Joint Family Military Assistance Program, Military Homefront Program, Military OneSource life coaching, Sesame Workshop DVDs, and the Military Child Education

Coalition (Quigley, S.) Overall, there is a great effort to help the lives of the families and children who experience the stress of deployment.

#### Further Research and Conclusions

In order to make it easier for children and spouses of military members, more research is needed. It is clear that routines and responsibilities do become a prominent issue when dealing with deployment, but further research could examine how helpful these routines are on the children. Observing children engaging in particular routines, and filling out questionnaires to gauge their content of the situation may be helpful. Other research could include what routines and responsibilities have the most positive effects on children. Finding out what seems to be making the biggest and most positive impact on children's lives would be a way to make the transition of deployment easier on children.

One aspect of research that was not addressed was the effect of outside support groups that the military offers, such as Field Readiness Group (FGR)—a support group for families who are left on the homefront. There are also camps, such as Camp Noah, which children can attend during deployment. Children learn strategies to deal with the situation, in an environment where everyone is dealing with the same set of issues. These groups and camps should be researched in further studies, to learn what is successful in making the children the most comfortable during deployment.

Routines and responsibilities were a common theme to help separated families deal with deployment. Beginning the attacks on Pearl Harbor in 1941, many families were changed forever. The terrorist attacks on 9/11 were also life-changing for many families in the United States. But as America enters into war and service members volunteer to fight for the freedom of the country, the courageous families, especially children, on the home front cannot be forgotten.

Without them, the service members would have much different support or motivation to be overseas. For that reason alone, communities should provide the homefront families with continuous support as they take on the challenges of prolonged deployment.

Many families have already been successfully reunited with their deployed family member, and their advice and experiences need to be shared to help others along the way. This way the effects of deployment on children can be minimized and a transition from a separated family to a reunited one can be as easy as possible.

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